

## Tortoises and terrapins as pets

**Life expectancy:** Tortoises can live up to 100 years, sweet water turtles and terrapins such as the red-eared slider up to 80 years. Caring for tortoises is the commitment of a lifetime!

### Costs

|               |  |   |
|---------------|--|---|
| Animal        | 100-250 CHF  | Depends on age, species and provenience   |
| Initial costs | 2000–10'000 CHF  | Species-adequate enclosure in the garden or large indoor terrarium with adequate structures and many technical fixtures (Infrared bulbs, ultra violet lamps, water pump, filter, timer, heating...) |
| Yearly costs  | ca. 500 CHF  | Food, veterinary costs, sojourns in animal pensions or shelters during holidays or tortoise-sitting at home, hibernation (may also be “out-sourced” to a specialist                                 |
| Varia         | Unforeseen veterinary costs can greatly exceed the price of purchase of the animals. |   |

### Sensitive animals

Even before deciding for tortoises or terrapins as pets, future owners need to inform themselves thoroughly by asking experienced tortoise or terrapin owners or specialists as well as by reading the relevant technical literature. Mistakes in housing and/or husbandry can lead to long lasting suffering and slow dying – only a specialist can tell health problems in tortoises in time! Tortoises make very complicated pets, and housing tortoises in species-adequate enclosures is very expensive.

### Sunbathers

Tortoises and Terrapins need the UV-radiation of natural sunlight for a healthy carapax growth. As poikilothermic animals, they also need warmth (infrared radiation) to become active.

### Tortoise Garden

Only garden owners can offer tortoises and terrapins a species-adequate habitat with fresh air and natural sunlight. Baby tortoises grow quickly and make housing in indoor terrariums impossible. They will also soon have to be housed outdoors.

### Where to buy

Responsible animal owners buy their animals either at an animal shelter run by a local animal protection organisation, at a sanctuary run by SIGS, the Swiss tortoise society, or a responsible Swiss breeder. Ask for expert advice! At any rate, do not buy tortoises on markets in southern countries. In many cases, you will get animals of protected species that cannot be imported without permission by the CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) and the Swiss Veterinary Office (SVO). In



buying such animals, you will also support illegal capture and trade of endangered species, which ultimately threatens the existence of natural tortoise populations. Even for species not on the red list you'll need an import permission issued by the SVO. For a few bigger species, a permit is also required for keeping the animals as a pet. Such permits are issued by the Cantonal Veterinary Office.

Refrain from buying animals via the internet! You either support animal mass production under unspeakable conditions, or you might even be cheated.

### What do tortoises need?

Species-adequate housing for Hermann's tortoises (*Testudo hermanni sp.*) is only possible if these animals can be housed in a garden enclosure in summer. If there is no such possibility, one must refrain from keeping these tortoises. The enclosure needs to be sunny, but shady places are also required. A wooden palisade or a stone wall are ideal to keep the tortoises in, since they are well-equipped diggers and climbers. The ground should offer various qualities and the enclosure can be structured with stones, roots, bushes, shelters etc. Hermann's tortoises are pure vegetarians. They feed on grass, herbs and fibre-rich hay. Fruit can induce problems with digestion, meat and meat products (such as dog or cat food) should not be given, since too much protein leads to excess carapax growth.

### What do terrapins need?

The well known red-eared slider (*Trachemys scripta elegans*) is best housed in a garden enclosure with a terrapin pond. The pond must feature several square metres and be at least 1 metre in depth. However, it should offer deep as well as shallow water, plus a powerful filter system. Part of the water needs to be replaced regularly to keep the pond clean, since terrapins excrete lots of waste. Baby sliders first need to be housed in a large indoor tank, in an aqua-terrarium. They need both water to swim (depth: at least double carapax length), resting places (not free swimming corks barks, since they cannot scale them), sunning spots and clean water all the time. Red-eared sliders should only be kept as same-sexed groups, otherwise the males will harass the females. Baby sliders eat mostly protein-rich food, with increasing age the diet should be adapted to an increased need for plant matter such as salad or dandelion leaves.

### Hibernation

Many species of terrapins and tortoises hibernate. Correct hibernation is not easy to simulate, and there are several suggestions of how to do it (box of leaves, wood chips and dirt in the cellar; regularly aired refrigerator; deep outdoor-trench in the ground, respectively). Contact a specialist for advice, for example the person you bought the animals from, or phone SIGS. All tortoises, also young ones, should hibernate, the only exception being sick animals.

### Reproduction

Refrain from breeding tortoises or terrapins. It is difficult to place the offspring. Responsible persons ready to look after the animals for the next 80-100 years and owning a well-structured garden for tortoises or terrapins are very rare. There are still many homeless tortoises waiting to be placed in animal shelters and sanctuaries.

### Tortoises, Terrapins and Holidays

Tortoises and terrapins should preferably be left at home in their familiar enclosure and be cared for by a competent, reliable "tortoise-sitter". As an alternative, tortoises can also be brought to an animal shelter or sanctuary, which costs 15-30 CHF per day. Abandon of animals is forbidden in Switzerland and can be fined with up to 20'000 CHF.

## **Tortoises, Terrapins and Kids**

If housed according to the behavioural needs of the species, tortoises and terrapins offer interesting opportunities to observe reptile behaviour. Taming these stress-susceptible animals as pets is difficult, and questionable at best. Tortoises and terrapins are not toys or animals for cuddling, but demanding pets. All on their own, children cannot take care for the tortoises or terrapins – also from a financial point of view. An adult needs to guide and supervise them. Often it cannot be predicted whether children of today will still be interested in the tortoises or terrapins later on, when they've grown to be teenagers or adults, and whether they will have enough time for the animals or the opportunity to house them adequately. Therefore, a thorough discussion of a child's wish for a tortoise as pet is essential, as well as the consultation of specialists.

## **Information and contacts**

- „Tortoises and terrapins as pets?“, „The red-eared slider“, „Hermann's tortoise“ (german), PDF information leaflets of Swiss Animal Protection SAP / Schweizer Tierschutz STS, Dornacherstrasse 101, Postfach, 4008 Basel, also helpdesk, free advice (German, French, English), free information brochures and orders 061 365 99 99, Fax 061 365 99 90, [www.tierschutz.com](http://www.tierschutz.com), [sts@tierschutz.com](mailto:sts@tierschutz.com)
- Protection et Récupération des Tortues PRT, animal welfare organization specialized on tortoises and terrapins, member organization of Swiss Animal Protection SAP, Grand Paquier, 1373 Chavornay, phone: 024 441 86 46 (French only), [www.tortue.ch](http://www.tortue.ch), free advice, rehoming of tortoises and terrapins
- „The red-eared slider“, „Construction of a pond to house sliders and other terrapins“, „Herrmann's tortoise“, „Hibernation of European tortoises“, „Outdoor-enclosures for European tortoises“ (german), information leaflets of the Swiss Tortoise Society / Schildkröten-Interessengemeinschaft SIGS, Postfach, 4416 Bubendorf, [www.sigs.ch](http://www.sigs.ch), [info@sigs.ch](mailto:info@sigs.ch), Advice 079 432 76 32, also free advice, tortoise and terrapin sanctuaries

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